

# What White Children Need to Know About Race

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Growing up in the suburban Midwest, I (Ali Michael) never talked about race with my family. We were white, all of our neighbors were white, and it never occurred to us that there was anything to say about that. As a result, in later years, I developed a deep sense of shame whenever I talked about race — particularly in college, where I was expected to make mature personal and academic contributions to race dialogues.

At a certain point, I realized that this shame came from the silence about race in my childhood. The silence had two functions. It was at the root of my lack of competency to even participate in conversations on race. But it had also inadvertently sent me the message that race was on a very short list of topics that *polite people do not discuss*. My parents did not intend for me to receive this message, but because we never talked about race, I learned to feel embarrassed whenever it came up. And so even when I wanted to participate in the conversation, I had to contend with deep feelings of shame and inadequacy first.

Research on white racial socialization is beginning to emerge within the field of racial socialization that makes it clear that many white people share my experience. In particular, the research suggests that for fear of perpetuating racial misunderstandings, being seen as a racist, making children feel badly, or simply not knowing what to say, many white parents tend to believe that there is never a right time to initiate a conversation about race.<sup>1</sup> They talk to their children about race if it becomes relevant in their lives (mostly in negative contexts). Otherwise, they tell their children that people are all the same and that they should not see race.

While white parents' intention is to convey to their children the belief that race *shouldn't* matter, the message their children receive is that race, in fact, *doesn't* matter. The intent and aim are noble, but in order for race not to matter in the long run, we have to acknowledge that, currently, it does matter a great deal. If white parents want their children to contribute to what researchers Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer

describe as a “racially just America”<sup>2</sup> in which race does not unjustly influence one’s life opportunities, their children will need to learn awareness and skills that they cannot acquire through silence and omission.

### **White Racial Socialization**

Scholars differentiate between active and passive socialization, as well as proactive and reactive socialization. Active racial socialization occurs in contexts in which racial socialization is deemed essential for children’s ability to effectively navigate their world. Because many white families generally do not consider racial competencies among the skills their children will need when they grow up, they tend to socialize passively and reactively. This strategy leads to silence about race in many white households. Because U.S. society is already structured racially, silence leaves unchallenged the many racial messages children receive from a number of socializing agents, which consistently place whites at the top of the racial hierarchy. *Silence* is thus hardly a passive stance; labeled “whiteness-at-work” by Irene H. Yoon, education professor at the University of Utah,<sup>3</sup> silence is a socialization strategy that perpetuates a racist status quo.

Racial socialization for white youth, then, is the process by which they learn what it means to be white in a society that currently values whiteness. It differs markedly from the racial socialization of people of color because of the ways that whites tend to benefit materially from systems of racism.

**Silence is a racial message and a “tool of whiteness.” In order to support the goals of their diversity mission statements and work toward a “racially just America,” schools need to take a more proactive approach to teaching white students about race and racial identity.**

While the research on white racial socialization is new, a 2014 study by Bartoli *et al.*<sup>4</sup> describes the results of 13 in-depth family interviews in which white parents and their children (ages 12 to 18) were interviewed both separately and together as a family in the first qualitative study of its kind. They found that most of the white families opted to socialize their children by telling them not to be racist, not to talk about race, not to use the word “black,” and not to notice racial differences. They wanted their children to believe that all people are the same and that racism is bad. They defined racism as overt, violent, and, for the most part, anachronistic. They felt that, if they emphasize these messages, they will impart to their children messages of racial equality. However, the individual interviews with their children showed that when children only know what *not* to do or *not* to talk about, they don’t have the lenses to understand racial dynamics in their lives, nor the skills to address them.

Regarding race, the messages that white teens in the Bartoli *et al.* study received were contradictory and incomplete. While they believed that everyone is the same, that race is superfluous, and that hard work determines where one gets in life, they also professed beliefs about differences among racial groups, including that black people are

lazy or poor, that poor black neighborhoods are dangerous, and that black people are physically stronger than whites. Because these white teens lacked a systemic analysis of racism, they had no way of understanding the impact of the structural racism they observed around them, such as the de facto segregation through academic tracking in their schools or in the geography of their cities. Thus, in spite of the fact that they had been taught that race does not matter and that they should be color-blind, when faced with a question that challenged them to explain structural racism, the only answers available to them were ones that relied on racial stereotypes. Overall, the teens did not seem to be able to differentiate between what is racist and what is, simply, racial. They tended to classify any mention of race as racist.

### **The Role of Schools in White Racial Socialization**

While most scholars of racial socialization agree that the primary means of racial socialization happens in the home, there is also broad consensus that it is a multidirectional process and that messages reach children through books, media, television, music, and schools. Many white parents in the Bartoli *et al.* study used school as one of their only conscious racial socialization strategies, sending their children to racially diverse schools in the hope that they would learn the racial competence they needed by being in a racially diverse environment. Yet few schools currently engage in conscious policies to support the development of positive racial identity, in spite of the fact that research has shown that such work could lead to a better racial climate as well as stronger academic outcomes for all students.<sup>5</sup>

Independent schools tend to have mission statements and/or diversity statements that indicate that they want their school communities to be diverse. But such statements tend to reflect the racial socialization goals of most white parents: wanting to have racially diverse communities in which race does not matter. They rarely reflect an awareness of the need to teach racial skills and competencies in order to foster healthy racially diverse communities. Nor do they reflect an awareness that white children need to learn specific competencies in order to be full members of those racially diverse environments.

Some may argue that school is not an appropriate place for racial socialization. This view assumes that it is possible to maintain racial neutrality in schools. In fact, the neutral/color-blind approach that most schools currently use does racially socialize youth — it simply does so in a particular direction. As stated earlier, silence is a racial message and a “tool of whiteness.” In order to support the goals of their diversity mission statements and work toward a “racially just America,” schools need to take a more proactive approach to teaching white students about race and racial identity.

Howard Stevenson of the University of Pennsylvania runs programs in schools intended to help black youth contemplate the messages they receive about race from different sources and fortify themselves against negative racial messages that hinder them from being fully themselves or fully successful. Such racial socialization makes it possible for black students to resist, confront, deconstruct, analyze, and/or embrace the racial socialization they are receiving at school and from their families, to take more ownership

of their racial identity, and to make it positive.

What would the parallel process of positive racial identity development look like for white students?

Our research team set out to design a set of strategies for schools that want to take proactive steps toward assisting white children to develop a positive racial identity. We begin with *messages*, providing a general framework for white racial socialization. We then address specific *content knowledge* and skills that would empower students to become proactive in their engagement with racial issues and conversations.

### **Messages About Race**

One could fill a book with the myriad messages about race in this nation. What matters most are the messages we want our students to hear. Here's a short list of some of the central messages schools can offer.

*Talking about race is not racist. It's OK — and important.*

Because white students receive color-blind messages, they come to believe that merely talking about race is racist and, therefore, something that should be avoided. Students need to learn that there's a vast difference between *talking* about race and *being* racist. Racial talk leads to greater racial understanding and helps undermine the power of racist laws, structures, and traditions. Racist talk, on the other hand, helps to perpetuate the status quo and to further entrench racial myths and stereotypes. Avoiding race talk makes race itself unspeakable, which, in turn, gives it a negative connotation. Most white adults and teens participate in conversations about race only when there is a problem. They need support in changing their worldview to see the ways in which race is always present, regardless of whether there are problems associated with it. Further, race and racial differences aren't all bad. Racial tension is a reality, but so are cross-racial friendships and communities.

*Race is an essential part of one's identity.* Being white may have little meaning to some whites, but that does not mean it has no meaning. All white people are white in the context of a society that continues to disadvantage people of color based on race. Being white, in essence, means not having to deal with those disadvantages and therefore not having to notice them. Schools can help foster awareness about the meaning of whiteness by helping white students develop a positive racial identity, which requires an understanding of systemic racism. While students may need to be reassured that they did not ask to be white, or for any of the advantages that might come with it, they should also know that the reality in which they are embedded ascribes unearned privileges to their whiteness. It is through seeing themselves in a larger racialized context that white people can begin to understand how they can work to change racism — and change what it means to be white.

*Create a positive white identity that allows white students to move toward it.* In her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Beverly Daniel Tatum

suggests that, in the traditional context of race, there are only three ways to be white: ignorant, color-blind, and racist. With options like these, she asks, who would choose to identify with their whiteness? She suggests that we have to create a fourth way to be white: the antiracist white identity. Schools need to create spaces in which students can identify as white and simultaneously work against racism. Whites have choices regarding how to use the privilege that comes from being white. All of the above considerations as well as content knowledge below can foster an antiracist white identity.

### **Content Knowledge**

At the very least, schools that believe in equity and justice and want their students to be future leaders need to help students — especially white students — understand the history of race and racism and how both play out in contemporary society. This racial content knowledge constitutes a basic social literacy that all students should have.

## **Students must develop a sense of how systemic racism works on an individual, community, and institutional level.**

*Be clear about the meaning of “race.”*

Race is a social construct, not a biological fact. But too many people believe the latter — confusing a few distinguishing traits with essential difference. So schools first need to clarify our biological sameness and explore the implications of race as a social construct. One strategy for doing this is to ask students, “What does it mean to be \_\_\_\_\_ (Asian, black, Latino, Native American, white)?” Then point out how their answers usually do not correlate with phenotypic characteristics, but rather with social ideas and constructs. Studying how whiteness was constructed historically through institutions that served whites while denying services to nonwhites or through residential segregation also helps students see how whiteness began to be associated with certain social patterns and realities.

*Understand systemic racism.*

Understanding systemic racism helps change the conversation from one of individual culpability to one in which we are all heavily influenced by our position within a system of racial stratification. It helps students broaden their lenses beyond their immediate surroundings and see how racism shapes the wider landscape of their lives. Without a systemic analysis of racism, it is impossible to understand why race continues to matter. Students must develop a sense of how systemic racism works on an individual, community, and institutional level.

*Learn how antiracist action is relevant to all.*

The course of history for any population in the United States was and will continue to be determined by the history of all racial groups. Even though they tend to be taught in isolation, racial group histories are, in fact, deeply interconnected and interdependent. Without explicit acknowledgment of such interdependence, students will find it difficult to understand their connection to other racial groups.<sup>6</sup> Further, the history of antiracist

struggles in the United States involved white people. The stories of these antiracists throughout history should be taught so that white students can envision possible ways to be white and antiracist.

*Understand stereotypes and their counternarratives.*

Students are exposed to numerous stereotypes of people of color. It's essential for students to be able to recognize these, understand how they might have developed, analyze the function they play to maintain social hierarchies, and learn accurate information that counters the stereotypes. They need to hear counternarratives — stories of people whose lives do not conform to the stereotypes. They also need multiple stories of various racial groups to fully move beyond stereotypes and understand the richness existing within each community.

**Skills**

Part of the work of supporting an antiracist identity for white students involves teaching them skills to be proactive in discussing race, confronting racism, building interracial friendships, and acknowledging racism.

*Develop self-awareness about racist beliefs.*

Building a positive racial identity requires one to recognize and counter one's inaccurate beliefs about race. We routinely learn stereotypical and incorrect information from the world around us. Students should be encouraged to realize that no one is free of racist beliefs; therefore, the aim is *not* to not have them, but rather to recognize them and access the content knowledge needed to refute them. Self-awareness about race is a lifelong practice that asks us to notice race and racial bias consistently and critically.

*Analyze media critically.*

Learning to filter and evaluate the racial messages students receive from media can help students apply their knowledge about race and recognize its impact in the world around them. This skill also helps them begin to realize the ways in which racist messages are delivered and reinforced. Such analytical skills will then provide them with further knowledge and language to resist and counter those messages in conscious and proactive ways.

*Learn how to intervene.*

White youth (and many white adults) are often at a loss about what to do when they witness racism. They need skills to recognize, name, intervene in, and/or reach out for assistance in racist incidents. Such skills might include recognizing relevant situations, identifying one's own sphere of influence, and accessing resources to respond either in the moment or afterward. It is not always appropriate or safe to intervene with racism in the moment, be it overt or subtle. But the capacity to name it, to withdraw from it, to ally oneself with the target, or to otherwise refuse to collude with it can be an empowering act for the student and, in itself, promote social change.

*Manage racial stress.*

It is essential to provide students with tools to be able to understand their emotional

reactions and learn to manage them. Strategies include identifying the sources of anxiety, normalizing them, and accessing relevant support in allies. Over time, the very process of confronting racism and withstanding the relevant anxiety makes the practice easier to navigate.

*Honor and respect racial affinity spaces for students of color.*

Many schools now recognize the efficacy of creating racial affinity spaces for students of color, particularly with regard to countering the effects of stereotype threat<sup>7</sup> and creating a sense of safety and camaraderie within predominantly white spaces. Learning to accept that such spaces can be important resources for peers of color, without feeling threatened or excluded from those dynamics, can be an important step for white students who want to participate in the construction of a healthy multiracial community. Racially competent white students would understand such a gathering of students of color as ultimately supportive of interracial relationships, rather than in opposition to them. White racial affinity groups can also be powerful spaces for white students to cultivate and affirm their antiracist identities. This would not be a white cultural group or a white activity space; white students should never meet in an exclusively designated white space except for explicitly antiracist purposes. That said, so much growth can happen when white people challenge and support one another to learn about race and racism, particularly because white students do often have different learning needs from students of color that can be accommodated in an affinity group space.

*Develop authentic relationships with peers of color and other white students.*

This skill involves learning to connect with peers of all different races with an understanding of the racialized context within which those relationships take place. In this context, the ability to name and discuss race in all of its facets (both enriching and problematic) is essential, so that everyone's reality can be accounted for, engaged with, and affirmed. This, in turn, will lead to more authentic interracial relationships.

*Recognize one's racist and antiracist identities.*

Students must be able to acknowledge the "both/and" possibility of simultaneously being racist and antiracist. It's not unusual for white Americans to project both a sense of friendliness and rejection toward people of color.<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging this seemingly contradictory state of being can be crucial to breaking down the binary in which people are always either "racist" or "not racist" and creates the space to receive important critical feedback that may challenge one's self-image as antiracist, yet simultaneously offer the possibility of growing in one's antiracism.

## **Racially Just Schools**

White children are racially socialized by a number of forces, many of which, as educators, we cannot directly control. Schools, however, can play a crucial role in shaping racial socialization for white children. Ideally, white racial socialization in school would promote children's abilities to build productive and genuine relationships with the people of color in their lives, and to recognize the effect that race has on their experience. In this way, children can be more than simply passive participants in an

unjust racial system, but actually shape the racial reality in which they are embedded in the very ways that so many parents and schools already wish for.

The white racial socialization perspectives and skills proposed here will contribute not only to healthier schools and communities, but also to healthier individuals, less susceptible to the acquisition of misinformation and therefore less likely to perpetuate harm toward others. These skills and perspectives create spaces where it is more difficult for racism to thrive because there are more white people resisting it and deconstructing it. This work stands in stark contrast to color-blindness, which provides ample room for the status quo to develop stronger roots. A community in which critical race analysis plays a central role is one in which people truly have a choice about how to be more fully themselves, outside of the preestablished roles assigned by racial constructs. Given the importance of this work, it's hard to imagine why we wouldn't embrace it.

If we want a racially just world, we need racially aware schools.

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#### Notes

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